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Next Montgomery County Council shaping up as less divisive

Likely members 'aren't all that different from each other,' Elrich says

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

The results of the primary election mean the next Montgomery County Council will be less divisive, some members say.

The clear-cut factions that formed following the 2006 election and the two special elections since then are no longer apparent. And the issues that sparked them — mainly policy differences about growth and contentious elections — are no longer relevant, said Councilman Marc B. Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park.

He predicts the next council will unite on issues such as the budget, which in the past year also gave the current council common ground. In May, the council voted unanimously on a fiscal 2011 budget that filled a \$1 billion shortfall. The next council's term begins Dec. 6.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda was the only incumbent council member running in the Sept. 14 primary election who did not win. Councilman Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown did not seek re-election.

Challenger Del. Craig L. Rice (D-Dist. 15) of Germantown won in the council's 2nd District primary race, and challenger Hans Riemer, a Silver Spring Democrat, was among the winners of the at-large primary race.

All nine will advance to the Nov. 2 general election, where they are expected to win in the heavily Democratic county. Most will face competition from Republicans.

"I think this council certainly looks to me to be nine people who aren't all that different from each other," Elrich said of the apparent winners.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park predicts the next council will be more constructive.

The current council members came together in the final year of their terms, but there were times during the past four years when their working relationship was strained, he said.

The council avoided personal disagreements during budget deliberations this year that had plagued some of their earlier decision-making, Leventhal said.

In Dec. 2009, the council bucked 40 years of tradition and elected Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park as its president, bypassing then-council Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac. The vote was 5-4, perhaps the clearest indicator of the council's division.

Besides her own vote, Floreen gained the support of council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5), Knapp, Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) and Leventhal. Berliner had his own vote, plus those of Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, Trachtenberg and Elrich.

Afterward, Berliner referred to the decision as bad governance.

In March 2008, Trachtenberg told The Gazette that then-council President Knapp was singling her out for attacks when he questioned the amount the county was spending on employee pensions — an issue taken up by the fiscal committee Trachtenberg chairs.

In April 2009, Trachtenberg walked out of a committee meeting during a vote after arguing with Leventhal over procedure.

As recently as 2007, the council also was largely divided by the county's growth policy, with Andrews, Elrich, Trachtenberg and now-deceased Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D) supportive of the policy adopted by the council, and Floreen publicly saying the policy would halt growth in the county.

An attempt to reach Trachtenberg on Monday was unsuccessful, and council spokesman Neil H. Greenberger said she would not be handling council business this week as she deals with an illness in her family.

"The public does not like to see elected officials being contentious and argumentative," Leventhal said Monday. "We're all resolving to look ahead with a spirit of cooperation. That doesn't mean we will agree all the time, but there is a strong desire to work together cooperatively and responsibly."

That goal might be helped by the fact the County Council primary was spared the ugliness that marked some state office races in the county. Candidates did not send out negative mailers, and comments during public forums were largely benign.

Rierner said his goal in campaigning was not to align himself with a particular council faction, but to maintain a good relationship with all incumbents. Ervin was an early supporter of Rierner and Rice.

"Even during a tough campaign I made sure I would be an effective council member, never engaging in divisive politics with people who would be my colleagues," Riemer said. "I think I'm in a very good position to help change the tone" on the council.

Andrews said the likely addition of Riemer and Rice to the council will significantly affect the way the council operates, citing fresh perspectives and new personalities.

"I think it's healthy to have an infusion of new ideas and new people on a regular basis," said Andrews, who added that he will miss Trachtenberg's work on the council.

"It can be significant when you have turnover on such a small body," he said.

Andrews, the longest-serving council member, has been in office since 1998. He ran unopposed in last week's primary.

Since 2002, the council has had significant turnover, he said, with four new members being elected in each of the past two elections — 2002 and 2006. There have been two special elections since then — in 2008 and 2009 to replace deceased members.

Knapp said he's curious to see how the next council operates. Incumbents rallied together before the election, but he's unsure whether that collaboration will last, he said.

Knapp said any factions that appear on the council will be determined by the issues they take up, such as the restructuring of county government, which is now under way.

"I'll be curious to see how they react," he said. "It's going to be a very challenging four years for everyone."